

Similar themes in iliad and odyssey

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Homer's Iliad and Odyssey share many thematic concerns, as are fundamental to the epic tradition. Most significant are the issues of lineage, xenia, and divine intervention – all of which are of the utmost importance in Ancient Greek tradition.

The extracts from each poem illustrate the centrality of lineage in patriarchal Ancient Greek society, as the characters in both clearly believe in honouring their fathers' connections. In the Iliad, the matter of ancestral ties is so important that men of the opposing armies, Trojans and Achaeans, are compelled to abandon their duties as warriors; Glaukos and Diomedes reconcile with each other at the realisation of their fathers' bond. The Greek warrior adopts a conciliatory tone towards Glaukos – as heard in the phrase “See now”, a phrase which evokes familiarity, as the narrator illustrates with the description of his “winning words of friendliness” – thus disavowing the enemy status held between the two heroes up until that moment in the battle. The significance of familial links is foregrounded as he refers to “our fathers”, the plural possessive lexically unifying them on the basis of patrimony. This unity established, the implication is that they can do no harm to one another – it would be wholly inappropriate, and a dishonour to their fathers.

To emphasise his point, Diomedes elaborates on the history of the bond, detailing how “Brilliant Oineus once was host to Bellerophon / the blameless”, making the connection explicit and undeniable. Whilst it can be assumed that this recollection is for the benefit of the reader, that Glaukos would already be aware of the particulars of a story which held so much importance in his family history, it does undoubtedly strengthen the Trojan's

conviction that to renounce battle is his moral and cultural duty. This scene clearly demonstrates cultural significance of patriarchal lineage to the Ancient Greeks as the two men agree that “ I am your friend...and you are mine” on the basis of their fathers’ bond alone; two enemy soldiers are willing to “ avoid each other’s spears” upon their discovery – in the ninth year of devastating war, this indicates the magnitude of meaning behind ancestral connection.

Similarly in the Odyssey, the goddess Athene disguises herself as Mentos, a friend of Odysseus, in order to gain the trust of his son, Telemachus. Once she has introduced herself as the man, she declares “ Your father and I claim to be guest-friends by heredity / from far back”; the intensifying phrase which is the end focus of this statement stresses that their families are tied through generations, and that Mentos and Odysseus can call themselves ‘ guest-friends’ solely on that basis indicates the importance of ancestry. The implication of this is clearly that Telemachus is to trust this man, as there is a history of loyal relations between their families – this is the Athene’s purpose in disguising herself as Mentos, as she is at Ithaca to reassure the young man of Odysseus’s life and advise him on his best course of action.

Athene also expresses the meaningful friendship, in order to put Telemachus at ease, by comparing him to his father. The moment in which she, presenting as Mentos, describes the likeness “ about the head” and in “ the fine eyes” feels immensely tender, and creates a sense of nostalgia. This touching display is to be interpreted by Telemachus as affected by the older man’s 20 years apart from his friend, as he mentions when Odysseus “ went

away to Troy”, for the 10 year battle, which is understood to have ended 10 years prior to the Odyssey.

A further theme evident in each extract is that of the matter of hospitality in the Ancient Greek world. In the Iliad, *xenia* is central to this; Diomedes gives great attention to the exchange of gifts between his and Glaukos’s ancestors, detailing the “golden and double-handed drinking cup” his father Oineus received from Bellerophontes, and is sure to demonstrate that it is still “in my house”, that it remains a significant object to him and his family. This is a show of respect towards Glaukos and his father, and it is implied that the expectation is that he too honours the “war belt bright with the red dye” from the gift exchange. The centrality of *xenia* is further emphasised towards the end of Diomedes’s speech, as he proposes “let us exchange our armor” in order to solidify their bond, so that “others may know / how we claim to be guests and friends” – it is clear that despite the drastic shift in tensions between the two warriors, with this display of their ancestral connection, neither hero would be questioned by their fellows of their respective armies; hospitality is too highly valued in their culture for it to be challenged.

However, it is arguable that the exchange between Diomedes and Glaukos is somewhat false, that the Achaian does not truly extend *xenia* towards the Trojan, as they exchanged “gold for bronze”, “nine oxen’s worth the worth of a hundred”. Whilst Glaukos’s agreement to this was due to the powers of Zeus, that Diomedes suggested this exchange indicates his intentions to cheat the Trojan and to gain personally from the encounter. This reflects the

wider story of the Trojan War itself, as war is the ultimate destructor of equal and civil relations between peoples, relations which perhaps it is impossible for Diomedes and Glaukos to achieve in this context. On the other hand, it can be argued that the real *xenia* of this scene is not that of the material exchange, but is in “the promise of friendship” between the men. As they are physically “both springing down from behind their horses”, they metaphorically abandon the normal rules of battle, and as they “gripped each other’s hands” they closed both the literal and figurative distance between them. After nine years of intensive fighting, to agree to stop fighting with just one opposing warrior, to spare his life and not gain the glory of murder, was a major shift from the norm. Therefore, the central act of hospitality in this section of the Iliad is in the consolidation of friendship in itself.

Comparatively, in the Odyssey, Telemachus extends *xenia* towards Athene, who is disguised as Mentos, despite being unsure at first “what man” has entered his home; a respectable Greek feels obliged to welcome any guest into his home, as to reject them or to be a less than gracious host would tarnish their reputation, and potentially upset the gods, whom the mortals believed tested them in these instances. Thus, upon Athene’s arrival, Telemachus taking her “by the right hand”, exclaiming his welcome, and insisting that nothing can be said or done until his new guest has “tasted dinner” is not simply a sign of warm character, but one of an incredibly status-conscious man.

In exchange for the Ithacan's hospitality, the goddess – as Mentès – is a courteous guest, and a helpful one also. “ I will accurately answer all that you ask me” she proclaims, showing a willingness to cooperate; Telemachus has shown great kindness to the old man, so in return, his guest is clear and informative, in order to put his anxieties about unfamiliarity at rest. This is further aided by Athene's answers in themselves, due to the evocation of the host's father, as well as the later assurance of Odysseus's safety and the wise advice given to the host. Whilst this is not a material exchange, nor one of life and death, *xenia* is shown in the graciousness of both participants.

Another key epic theme demonstrated in the two passages is that of divine intervention. In the Iliad, when Diomedes proposes that he and Glaukos “ exchange our armor”, the reader does not receive the Trojans' untampered reaction; immediately, the gods interfere, as Zeus “ stole away the wits of Glaukos”, which is seen to be the direct causation of his acceptance of this exchange. The suggestion is that if Glaukos had been thinking clearly and independently, he would not have agreed to this, as it is an unequal trade of “ gold for bronze”. This scene is something of a microcosm, as it is a small example of immortal meddling in the affairs of the mortals; as “ the son of Kronos” changed the balance of material value to the men's arms, he also redressed the fates of great heroes such as Hektor and Achilles.

Similarly, in the Odyssey, the entire extract is centered on Athene presenting herself as Mentès, in order to take charge of the situation in Odysseus's Ithacan home. The reader is aware that it is “ the goddess gray-eyed Athene” talking when it is said “ I announce myself as Mentès, son of

“Anchialos / the wise”; Homer explicitly displays the intervention of the gods here. As Telemachus is miserable, “his heart deep grieving within him”, and distraught over his mother’s suitors, the gods decide that they must do something to rectify the situation – sending Odysseus’s old friend to “the very child of Odysseus” to help him is their solution. He is promised that “the gods be your witnesses”, evidently a proclamation meant to strengthen his statement, and cause the Greeks to believe and obey him, when he gathers “the Achaian warriors into assembly” to announce that Odysseus lives, and to “force the suitors out”. To be in favour with the gods ascertains your safety, and security in your position; Telemachus having the word of the gods allows him to embark on the physical journey to the homes of Nestor and Menelaos, the journey which parallels his journey from boy to man. Therefore, divine intervention is the driving force of the Odyssey’s plot.

The passages from the Iliad and the Odyssey are similar in many ways, due to the traditions of Ancient Greek culture; however, the two epics have contrasting aspects also worth noting. The former is focused on the battlefield, and everything else surrounds this context. The Odyssey on the other hand takes place 10 years after the end of the Trojan War, and the other themes are not centered on war – although the whole scenario is created by it – but on more domestic and internal matters. This is not to say that it is any less epic in scale; similar issues are merely placed in a different context, and different aspects are amplified.